

Setting expectations

This is a practically-oriented epistemology course, in which you will be asked to reflect deeply and critically on the ways in which you are committed to forming and revising your opinions, as well as participating more generally in the flow of ideas as informants and bystanders. By the end of the course, you will be expected to write your own epistemic manifesto, outlining the kind of epistemic agent you want to be.

Epistemology is often defined as the theory or philosophy of knowledge. We will think of epistemology as somewhat more broadly concerned with good ways of thinking and believing, with the aim of achieving cognitive contact with reality.

The course will involve both traditional reading assignments as well as “immersive” assignments. These are assignments that will ask you to *do* something – engage in a certain conversation, reflect in a certain way, pay attention to something in a new space – and then also write about it.

Learning objectives

Successful students will have:

- reflected on their current practices for forming/revising opinions, passing on information, and influencing others’ opinions more broadly.
- read and appreciated historical and contemporary philosophical sources advocating different approaches.
- engaged in earnest and respectful dialogue with their peers about these sensitive and personal issues.
- articulated for themselves, at the end of the course, their own reflective commitments as to the kind of epistemic agent they will be.

Material to be covered

The class will be concerned with five main questions, which will structure the class in five units.

- How skeptical should I be, and what kinds of things might I hope to know?
- How, if at all, should disagreement matter in my forming/revising opinions?
- How, if at all, should I read the news?
- What “knowing” should I outsource to my phone, and what (if anything) should I try to appreciate for myself?
- What do I owe to others, as a participant in the flow of information?

Weekly expectations

You'll have required readings for every class period. (*I will select required readings from among the readings listed on the schedule below, depending on, e.g., whether this is offered as a 100- or 200- level course.*) I will always provide you with a reading guide containing brief notes on questions I intend for us to discuss in class and – where relevant – historical context.

You'll also be required to complete an immersive activity every week. You can read about these assignments on the schedule below. Basically, I'm asking you to engage in a kind of practice or reflection and then write about it.

During class itself, I will keep lecturing to a minimum. Expect lots of class discussion and student-led presentations. At the beginning of the term I will assign you randomly to groups, and I will sometimes ask you to discuss or present in these groups.

Readings

All readings for this course will be available on the course website. I am more than happy to provide additional reading recommendations in my office hours.

Grades

Your grade will be determined as follows:

- 5% Epistemology inventories
- 10% In-class participation
- 20% Concluding manifesto
- 25% Pop quizzes
- 40% Immersive assignments

On the epistemology inventories – this is a survey you will take twice: once at the beginning of the term and once at the end. This survey should take you about 30-90 minutes to complete each time. It will ask about your epistemic commitments (including, e.g., deference to various kinds of authorities, global and local forms of skepticism, and news-acquisition and conversational practices). You will not be penalized or rewarded for the content of your answers.

On in-class participation – I expect you to attend all classes unless you have a formally excused absence. I also expect you to participate in class discussion. I'm not going to keep track of every time you talk, but I expect you to say something in class, whether in a presentation or in an informal discussion, at least every other class period. Please come talk to me if you are unsure or if you want to know your standing.

On the concluding manifesto – An important learning objective for this course is that you will have articulated for yourself, at the end of the course, your own reflective commitments as to the kind of epistemic agent you will be. This manifesto must include a section on each of the five questions listed above in “Material to be covered.” We will discuss what it should include in more detail a few weeks before the end of the term. I will provide you with a clear rubric that reflects the importance of your manifesto being honest and thoughtful. You will *not* be

penalized in any way for the content of your epistemological views. I only expect you to state your views clearly and provide reasons for them.

On the pop quizzes – I will administer five pop quizzes over the course of the term, plus one “make-up” quiz toward the end. These quizzes will cover the readings of the previous several class periods (since the last quiz). They will be multiple choice/short response in format. I will only use your top five quiz scores to calculate your grade. If you have an unexcused absence on a quiz day, you will earn a 0 for that quiz. If you have an excused absence on a quiz day, you will be allowed to take the extra make-up quiz toward the end of the semester. I will deal with students who have more than one excused absence on quiz days on an individual basis.

On the immersive assignments – these will be graded on completion. I trust that you are taking this class in good faith. I obviously cannot police the seriousness with which you actually undertook some of these practices. But you will get much more out of the class, *and* I will be much less likely to take off points, if you consistently put in a good effort.

Tentative schedule

*****Division of required/recommended readings TBD, depending on, e.g., whether offered as a 100- or 200- level course.**

Week 1: Introduction to the class and to epistemology

Main questions: *What is epistemology? And what am I going to do in this class?*

Immersive activity: Take our “personal epistemological inventory,” which will ask about your epistemic commitments (including, e.g., deference to various kinds of authorities, global and local forms of skepticism, and news-acquisition and conversational practices)

Readings: Introduction to Zagzebski’s (2008) *On Epistemology*, Wadsworth; Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*.

Unit 1: Skepticism

Week 2: Skepticism/Anti-skepticism and the Sciences

Main questions: *Given what psychology and neuroscience tell us about our brains/minds, how optimistic/pessimistic should I be about my ability to grasp truth? Given the flaws/merits of the scientific method, how optimistic/pessimistic should I be about the communal scientific enterprise?*

Readings: selections from Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*; Lehrer’s 2010 *New Yorker* article: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/12/13/the-truth-wears-off>; and his response to letters of reply: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/more-thoughts-on-the-decline-effect>; Shermer’s *Scientific American* article: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/what-skepticism-reveals/>; The Guardian

podcast on the replication crisis:

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/audio/2018/mar/19/a-neuroscientist-explains-psychologys-replication-crisis-podcast>

Immersive activity: Pick (i) or (ii). (i) Take the quiz (and read the article) at <https://bigthink.com/praxis/how-rational-are-you-try-this-quiz>. Now, 3 days of journaling about specific appearances of heuristics/biases in oneself or others; (ii) 3 days of journaling about which of one's actions and beliefs are influenced by science, now pick a few of those scientific beliefs and find the most compelling scientific argument or study you can, arguing for an *opposing* belief.

Week 3: Skepticism and Relativism

Main questions: *Is all knowledge I might have radically situated? Are my opinions radically influenced by my perspective, such that even if there is non-situated truth, I cannot hope to know it?*

Readings: Kukla (2006) "Objectivity and Perspective in Empirical Knowledge," *Episteme*; Pyrrho/Sextus, McBrayer NYTimes Op-Ed <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/02/why-our-children-dont-think-the-re-are-moral-facts/>

Immersive activity: Identify three of the things you most confidently believe, and reflect on what, if any, other events or circumstances in your life might have led you to think differently on this matter. Reflect on the effects of this exercise on those same beliefs, and explain why your confidence did or did not change.

Week 4: Pyrrhonian Skepticism

Main questions: *What ideas and practices from ancient skeptical ways of life, if any, should I incorporate into my own life?*

Readings: Selections from Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Skepticism*; Olfert (2015) "Skeptical Investigation and Its Perks"

Immersive activity: Choose 2-3 activities from among the following, or suggest a new skeptical practice to try as an immersive exercise. A) Wait until some issue arises this week, where you are experiencing discomfort as a result of feeling torn or confused as to what to believe. Practice crafting oppositions via the five modes, and see if you are drawn to suspend judgment on the matter. Reflect. B) Identify a fictional character who you think exemplifies Pyrrhonian skepticism, and explain why and how they do so in the world of the fiction. C) Read the list of Sextus's phrases, and identify ten connections for each phrase in your own life. (E.g., I suspend judgment about whether X,Y,Z...) Read this list to yourself twice through, three times this week (6 times total). Reflect on how you feel before and after this exercise, especially with respect to tranquility. D) Identify five of your most important, self-defining beliefs – maybe these are beliefs about who you are, beliefs about other people, religious beliefs, moral beliefs, or maybe none of these. Recall that Pyrrhonians would

officially suspend judgment on all these matters. Reflect on how if at all your life would change if you were to suspend judgment on these matters.

Week 5: Anti-skepticism in Philosophy

Main questions: *What, if anything, should I hope to know?*

Readings: Descartes' *Meditations I-V*; selections from Plato's *Meno*; Dretske (1970) "Epistemic Operators"; Pryor (2000) "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist".

Immersive activity: Undertake a personal "Cartesian" meditation. 1) Identify any reasons for being skeptical (either globally or locally) you find *prima facie* compelling and consider implications for your current beliefs; 2) identify any reasons for being nonetheless confident or hopeful about your beliefs; and 3) state what, if anything, you think you know and might hope to know.

Unit 2: Disagreement

Week 6: Disagreement

Main questions: *How should disagreements among informed individuals affect my opinions?*

Readings: Feldman (2007) "Reasonable Religious Disagreements," Lynch's article in the *Chronicle*:
<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Teaching-Humility-in-an-Age-of/240266>; Kelly (2005) "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement"; Mill, *On Liberty*

Immersive activity: (i) Identify an occasion on which your beliefs or confidence in your beliefs changed, upon learning of another person's differing beliefs on the same issue. (ii) Identify a belief that you confidently hold despite pervasive disagreement among those you respect intellectually, and explain why you are confident. (If you do not hold any such beliefs confidently, explain why.)

Unit 3: The news

Week 7: Fake news

Main questions: *What do I think fake news is, and should this depend on my political beliefs? How, if at all, are my views vulnerable to distortion by fake news, and how should I respond to any such risks?*

Readings: Michael Lynch Stone article
https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/28/opinion/fake-news-and-the-internet-shell-game.html?_r=1; Quinn (2017) "Fake News, False Beliefs, and the Need for Truth in Journalism"; Arendt (1967) "Truth and Politics"; Bret Stephens's NYTimes op-ed <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/24/opinion/dying-art-of-disagreement.html>

Immersive activity: Watch/read/do the recommended exercises experimenting with one's filter bubble here: <http://guides.library.illinois.edu/c.php?g=348478&p=2347794>; Scroll through your FB (or twitter) feed – or even just your Google/Apple news feed

– and identify the first 5 news or reporting links that you see. 1) Say which you think are probably true vs. not from a credible source (fake news). 2) Do some independent digging for corroboration, using a search engine outside your filter bubble (such as duckduckgo.com), and report on the actual results.

Unit 4: Outsourcing

Week 8: Outsourcing Knowledge

Main questions: *What knowledge should I outsource to my phone and/or my community, and what – if anything – is it important that I grasp for myself?*

Readings: Howell (2014) “Google Morals, Virtue, and the Asymmetry of Deference”; selections from Lynch (2016) *The Internet of Us*; Grimm (2011) “Understanding”; selections from Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

Immersive activity: Pick a day this week, and commit to not getting any information from a digital device. (Personal communication like texts and calls is fine; Googling, perusing social media sites, and checking your phone for the weather, or a map, or the news is not.) You may need to do some research in advance of this day and write things down. (Is there a recipe or a set of directions you’ll need?) You might want to make a temporary sign-off post on social media. You may also be interested in installing a “digital detox” app like Off the Grid, which completely blocks your phone for a length of time you determine. Each time you encounter a situation in which your instinct is to look something up on your phone, make a note. At the end of the day, reflect on those situations, how you handled them without being able to look something up, and whether it’s important to be less generally dependent on web-based sources of information.

Week 9: Trust and testimony

Main questions: *If I will sometimes defer to other people, what sources should I trust for which kinds of information, and how deferential should I be?*

Readings: Hawley (2014) “Partiality and Prejudice in Trusting,” Moran (2005) “Getting Told and Being Believed; Shieber (2014) “Against Credibility”

Immersive activity: Pick a day in which you will talk with several individual people – either in person, on the phone, over e-mail (interpret “talk” broadly). Make a note of each time someone tells you something you trust vs. do not trust. Think about why. Is it about the character of the person speaking? The plausibility of what they’re telling you? Something else – maybe the person’s social role? Reflect on what this single day suggests about your general tendencies to trust or not trust, and on what basis.

Week 10: Religious epistemology

Main questions: *Should I accept any religious (or divine, or spiritual) sources of information? How should I treat putative information from such sources, and how*

should I incorporate this into information from other sources like experience and reason?

Readings: Buchak (2012) “Can it be rational to have faith?” (reprinted version); Lebens (2013) “The epistemology of religiosity: an Orthodox Jewish perspective”; selections from Plantinga (2000) *Warranted Christian Belief*, selections from Alston (1993) *Perceiving God*, selections from Zagzebski (2012) *Epistemic Authority*; Hume “On Miracles”; John Paul II (1998) *Fides et Ratio*

Immersive activity: Talk to a teaching authority of a faith or religious tradition that you do not practice – e.g., pastor, imam, rabbi, priest. Explain that you are completing an assignment for class, ask if they’re willing to participate. Ask them why they believe the basic doctrines of their religion. Listen respectfully. Later, consider the reported sources of or reasons for this person’s religious beliefs. Do they cite authoritative texts, testimony, life experience, perceptual or mystical experience, and/or reasoning? Consider what would have to be true for them to be reasonable in their religious beliefs, given how these were formed.

Unit 5: What we owe to others

Weeks 11-12: The Ethics of Belief

Main questions: *Why does it matter what I believe? Am I morally responsible for what I believe, and if so why? What, if any, moral values or principles should guide my epistemic commitments?*

Readings: Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief”; selections from Craig (1990) *Knowledge and the State of Nature*, Basu (forthcoming) “Can Beliefs Wrong?”; Wood (2007) “The duty to believe according to the evidence”

Immersive activity: Formal parliamentary debate in class (you choose your “side”). Side 1: There are ethical obligations to have (not have) beliefs with good (bad) moral content. Side 2: There are no such ethical obligations.

Week 13: Belief and assertion

Main questions: *Given how I want to form my beliefs, are there ways I should be guarding or constraining my speech or conversation? In particular, when should I be willing to assert something?*

Readings: selections from Kant “On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns”, selections from Williamson (2000) *Knowledge and Its Limits* on knowledge as the norm of assertion, Lackey (2011) “Assertion and Isolated Second-Hand Knowledge”, Frankfurt “On Bullshit”

Immersive activity: Write a totally “bullshit” essay (in Frankfurt’s technical sense) about what our epistemic obligations to other people are. Start by stating your motive. After you’re done, reflect. How easy was that? How do you feel? What, if any, claims in your essay do you believe?

Week 14: Epistemic injustice

Main questions: *What forms of epistemic injustice do I see in my community or broader context, and how am I a participant in that injustice? What commitments can I make, to make me a better participant in the flow of information? Should I assert differently? Listen differently? Affect conversations in some other way?*

Readings: selections from Fricker (2007) *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*; McKinnon (2016) “Epistemic Injustice,” *Philosophy Compass*

Immersive activity: Find two days this week when you can be silent and listen in the presence of others talking in public for at least one hour. Preferably, you would be in the presence of others in some way different from you. You might choose to sit at a coffee shop or restaurant; people-watch at a park, on a busy street, or at a mall; study in a loud common area on campus; or even attend a religious service. Go somewhere you don't go often, if possible. At the end of each exercise, write down instances of what seemed like epistemically praiseworthy and blameworthy participation in conversations (did you hear people, e.g., “citing their sources,” listening to each other charitably, or talking over others – especially others from marginalized groups?).

Week 15: Reflection and concluding manifesto

Main questions: *What kind of an epistemic agent will I be? How will I conduct my intellectual life – how will I form and revise my opinions, and how do I commit to conduct myself as a participant in the flow of information?*

Readings: William James, “The Will to Believe”

Immersive activity: Write an epistemic manifesto. State your commitments clearly, honestly, and reflectively, writing one section for each of the main topical themes of the class; re-take the personal epistemology inventory, from Week 1. Compare results – to what extent do the two inventories differ? Where are the differences due to a clearer understanding of the question or one's own practices, vs. a change in one's view?